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## Quaker Project Offers Inmates Alternatives to Violent Actions

By JAMES V. O'CONNOR  
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**OSSINING**— WHEN Fernando Serrano enrolled in the Alternatives to Violence Project, he had to wait almost a year before taking the course because there were more than 700 men on the waiting list. His patience was tempered because time was something he had plenty of: he is serving a life sentence for murder.

Alternatives to Violence Project is a conflict-resolution workshop for inmates with a history of violent behavior at Sing Sing Correctional Facility. It is a program started by the Quakers in 1975 and still has strong Quaker involvement from meetings around the county. Each month the program conducts workshops at the prison for some of the most violent offenders in the New York State prison system.

"Quakers have been involved in prison ministry for a long time because the founders like George Fox were incarcerated for civil disobedience," said Fred Feucht, 65, a Quaker from the Purchase Meeting and an outside coordinator for the project at the prison.

Although the program is steeped in the nonviolent beliefs of the Quakers, most of the volunteers are not Quakers and believe that people need to learn conflict-resolution skills to avoid violence. Of the 40 volunteers in the Sing Sing program only about one-fourth are Quakers. "We grew out of the Quakers but we reached outside for most of our leaders," Mr. Feucht said. "A lot of our inside leaders are Muslims."

Inside, leaders are inmates who have completed the beginner and advanced workshops and now work as volunteers to conduct and administer the program. Mr. Serrano, 50, is the inmate chairman of the program and has been a coordinator for four years. He has 717 inmates on a waiting list to take the program, which is given monthly to 80 inmates serving time for crimes ranging from spousal abuse to murder. It is 22 hours long and held over three days. Many are trying to take it because it is a requirement for the parole board.

Facilitators in the program, whether inside prison or outside its doors, are all volunteers. Jeffrey Hayes, 36, a facilitator who is serving 16 1/2 to 33 years for armed robbery, originally took the program as a requirement for the parole board, even though he does not go before it until 2001. Mr. Hayes, who grew up with violence, began his sentence in Great Meadows Correctional Facility in Comstock, N.Y., which is known for housing violent offenders. He was stabbed twice in prison disputes. "When you are incarcerated

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you have time to think about things and how they are going to affect your life," Mr. Hayes said. "In society, things are happening fast and you have to find the tools to de-escalate situations."

Mr. Feucht, who was born into a nonviolent Quaker home, said he believes that volunteering helped him deal with conflict in a healthier way in family life. He also finds that prisoners taking the class can use some of their new-found skills almost immediately upon returning to the cell blocks, where violence can erupt at any time.

Ernest Henry, 33, a facilitator who has been imprisoned for 13 years, had been a college student and was not involved with street crime or drugs when he was sentenced to 20 years to life for killing his girlfriend in an argument. He has used the skills learned in the program to deal with the realities of prison life and to control his temper, which he acknowledges got him there. "Coming to prison was devastating for me because I was never a street person, which makes you a target in here," Mr. Henry said, "Doing the workshop was a beautiful process. I cried, and that is taboo in a macho environment like this."

Nonviolent resolution of conflict has been one of the cornerstone teachings of the Quaker community since its inception. Mr. Feucht said about half of the 600 Quakers in Westchester County were born Quakers and the other half are former Jews, Catholics, agnostics and atheists who were attracted to the nonviolent doctrine of the Quakers. There are a number of Quaker converts in Sing Sing and prisons throughout New York State, who found it through the project.

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